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**NAVAL WAR COLLEGE
Newport, R.I.**

Air Strikes and COIN in Operation Enduring Freedom

A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.

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Signature: _____

03 May 2010

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Abstract

Air Strikes and COIN in Operation Enduring Freedom

The recent limitation of the use of air strikes in Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) has highlighted a dilemma facing the ISAF Commander. He demands his forces assume greater risk by restricting the use of air strikes or risks mission failure by losing the support of the Afghanistan people as a result of collateral damage. Since OEF is on-going, analysis of another counterinsurgency where air strikes have played a large role could assess if the ISAF Commander's decision is correct. This paper examines the parallels between OEF and Vietnam to highlight the dilemma the ISAF Commander faces as he places restrictions on air strikes, a powerful combat multiplier. The paper explores the shortcomings of the use of air strikes in Vietnam and draws the conclusion that the commander's guidance in OEF is focused on winning the support of the people. Finally, the paper concludes that the more the Afghan people support ISAF and the Afghanistan government the closer the Taliban are to losing their support and their foothold in Afghanistan.

INTRODUCTION

In 2009, new restrictions in the use of the air instrument have changed the way the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan fights. General McChrystal, the operational level commander and Commander of ISAF, published a Tactical Directive Memorandum instructing commanders to scrutinize and limit the use of Close Air Support (CAS).¹ This has led ISAF to address the Afghanistan insurgency with a new approach. General McChrystal has aligned his tactics and intent with that of a multi-national counterinsurgency. As a result ISAF's operational imperative is, "gaining and maintaining the support and backing of the Afghanistan people."² Civilian casualties from CAS continue to be a dividing issue from the President of Afghanistan who blames ISAF, to the individual villagers who blame both ISAF and Afghan governmental leaders.³

The new restrictions take away the powerful punch of airdropped munitions from tactical formations resulting in frustration from troops on the ground. However, capabilities required for success on a conventional battlefield, such as the employment of massive firepower, may be of limited utility in a counterinsurgency (COIN). Conventional forces that try to use the capabilities to defeat insurgents almost always fail.⁴ Current restrictions on the air instrument in Operation Enduring Freedom, while tactically detrimental, are correctly aligned with a counterinsurgency fight.

1. GEN Stanley McChrystal, commander, International Security Assistance Force, to International Security Assistance Forces, Tactical Directive Memorandum, 6 July 2009.

2. Ibid.

3. Crispian Balmer, "Karzai says United States Wants to Manipulate Him," *Reuters*, September 7, 2009. <http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSL7677562> (accessed 20 March 2010).

4. U.S. Army. *Counterinsurgency*. Field Manual (FM) 3-24, Marine Corps Warfighting Publication (MCWP) 3-33.5. (Washington, DC: Headquarters Department of the Army and Navy, 15 December 2006), ix.

COIN at the operational level must support and foster the success of the host government, economic development, public administration, and the rule of law.⁵ This must be done to establish political power, which is the central issue in COIN. Each side vies for the people's acceptance of its authority as legitimate.⁶ For an insurgency to succeed it must eliminate the legitimacy of the government.⁷ Therefore, in Afghanistan, the legitimacy of the Afghan government is vital. Any action that delegitimizes the government and ISAF, such as civilian deaths and collateral damage from air delivered bombs, jeopardizes the successful outcome of the counterinsurgency.

Tactically, the battlefield may appear similar to a conventional fight at times. However, the enemy's goals at the tactical level are either psychological or physical⁸ such as destroying a school. Tactically, leaders must consider the second and third order effects of their actions. For instance, a bomb may eliminate the source of small arms fire but direct fire weapons may be more appropriate to limit collateral damage.⁹ The second and third order effects of using what seems to be the proper munition goes against the operational objectives with no real gain. Tactical success in a counterinsurgency guarantees nothing.¹⁰

AFGHANISTAN BACKGROUND

General McChrystal's Tactical Directive Memorandum has limited the air instrument. Numerous civilian casualties have degraded the legitimacy of the Afghanistan government

5. Ibid., x.

6. Ibid., 1-1.

7. Milan N. Vego, *Joint Operational Warfare: Theory and Practice* (Newport, RI: U.S. Naval War College, 2009), VII-20.

8. U.S. Army. *Counterinsurgency*. Field Manual (FM) 3-24, Marine Corps Warfighting Publication (MCWP) 3-33.5. (Washington, DC: Headquarters Department of the Army and Navy, 15 December 2006), 1-14.

9. Ibid., 7-7.

10. Ibid., 1-28.

and ISAF. In addition to producing collateral damage, applying too much force could cause the perception of indiscriminate destruction. Both collateral damage and indiscriminate destruction could serve as an Al Qaeda recruiting vehicle and achieve the opposite of ISAF's goals.¹¹

Rules of Engagement (ROE) for Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) began in 2001 with a restrictive set of rules. As the Pentagon and the United States Central Command (CENTCOM) translated the Commander in Chief's guidance into its most restrictive interpretation, the restraints emplaced were so stringent they likely reduced the chance of success. Sensitive targets were delegated to General Franks, the CENTCOM Commander. Rules stipulated that targets classified as 'significant,' that could cause a collateral damage incident, had to be approved by either CENTCOM or Washington and could not be approved by the Air Component Commander.¹²

ROE must be strict because an incident of large civilian casualties could have political repercussions and undermine support from United States' allies, especially Pakistan.¹³ If Pakistan withdrew its support and denied the United States use of her airspace, the difficulties, specifically access into Afghanistan, could impact operations significantly.

Once Special Operations Forces (SOF) were on the ground, targeting became more fluid. Although the stringent rules seemed to loosen, SOF forces experienced difficulty with the ROE. For example, SOF elements had to get approval from CENTCOM before firing on fleeing enemy combatants in Tora Bora. They had to describe the number of personnel,

11. Mark Clodfelter, *The Limits of Air Power: The American Bombing of North Vietnam* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), 221.

12. Benjamin S. Lambeth, *Air Power Against Terror: America's Conduct of Operation enduring Freedom* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 2005)., 312.

13. Ibid., 321.

which direction they were traveling, and why they were thought to be Al Qaeda.¹⁴ This friction could have caused the missed opportunity to strike Usama Bin Laden or other high-ranking Al Qaeda and Taliban members.

As the war continued, leaders adjusted to the pace of operations and utilization of air strikes improved. Up until 2003, avoiding Coalition casualties remained a major concern of United States commanders. As a result United States patrols that came under enemy fire attempted to break off contact as soon as possible. By 2004, small units were deployed in areas of insurgent activity in order to lure insurgents into battle and inflict heavy casualties with the help of air power.¹⁵

This technique was mentioned by the highest levels of Al Qaeda, specifically Ayman Zawahiri, the number two man in Al Qaeda, who said, “And so began the campaign of lies and deception: first the Loya Jirga, then the interim government, then the presidential and parliamentary elections...those elections which took place under the threat of aerial bombing to destroy any village suspected of harboring resistance to the Crusader.”¹⁶ Zawahiri infers that air strikes deterred Al Qaeda and the Taliban from interfering with Afghanistan elections in his December 2006 letter.

The Taliban feared United States air power, and they tried to avoid it with little success. The enemy struggled with how to deal with effective use of United States air power. Members of the Taliban admitted to the press that air strikes had dealt them heavy casualties.

14. Ibid., 316.

15. Antonio Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov, and Laptop: The Neo-Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan 2002-2007* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2008), 201.

16. Ayman Zawahiri, “Realities of the Conflict.” *In the Eyes of Your Enemy: An Al-Qaeda Compendium*. Newport, RI: Strategy and Policy Department, U.S. Naval War College, September 2009.

During 2005-2006, the Taliban were reported to have debated on how aggressive they could afford to be in the face of overwhelming United States air power.¹⁷

The risk of collateral damage and civilian casualties from close air support played into Al Qaeda's, often masterful, use of Strategic Communications.¹⁸ Whether or not civilians are killed while utilizing air support, civilians and insurgents claim that civilians have been killed. Regardless of the truth, such accusations grab headlines in the Islamic press, giving the perception that such attacks are emblematic of western disregard for Muslim civilian lives. Those perceptions have become the reality for those opposing the United States.¹⁹

The reliance on air strikes increased as the war continued. Between June and November 2006, the U.S. Air Force conducted more than 2,000 air strikes. The 2006 monthly rate of ammunition expenditure was ninety-eight bombs and 14,000 bullets, compared to twenty-two bombs and 3,000 bullets in 2001-2004.²⁰ With the increase in air activity, accusations of excessive force and significant casualties among the population intensified.²¹

Al Qaeda continues to transform the asymmetry in firepower and technology into a strategic advantage in the media. When the United States utilizes air strikes, Al Qaeda tries to capitalize on the event by exaggerating or lying about civilians killed and innocents targeted. The truth behind the claims seems immaterial. Taliban propaganda claims that tended to inflate the number of civilian victims of bombardments are difficult to dispute

17. Antonio Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov, and Laptop: The Neo-Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan 2002-2007* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2008), 110.

18. Marc A. Genest, "Strategic Communications" (lecture, U.S. Naval War College, Newport, RI, 26 JAN 2009).

19. Mark Clodfelter, *The Limits of Air Power: The American Bombing of North Vietnam* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), xi.

20. Antonio Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov, and Laptop: The Neo-Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan 2002-2007* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2008), 202.

21. Ibid., 202.

convincingly.²² Often Al Qaeda and the Taliban try to influence the media in their favor by attempting to spin their stories with an anti-American slant when talking and interviewing with Western reporters.²³ Once their message is out, the effect against ISAF is achieved.

To Al Qaeda, the media is the virtual battlefield, and Al Qaeda recognizes the virtual battlefield is more important than the kinetic battlefield. Zawahiri mentions that, “We are in a battle, and more than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media. And this media battle is a race for the hearts and minds of our people.”²⁴

One example of the use of air strikes being too unrestrained took place amongst the Afghan village elders in Zabul, Afghanistan. The elders said they felt that the Taliban were the only force which could help express their grudges against the government.²⁵ In another example, a British response to a single round fired by the Taliban in Kajaki, Helmand Province during February 2007 brought, “dozens of mortar rounds, bursts of red tracers from a 50-caliber machinegun, illumination flares, the flaming rush of a Javelin missile and the juddering explosion of a 1,000 kg guided bomb dropped from a Harrier jet.”²⁶ The widespread use of air strikes and its side effects contributed to pushing many elders to side

22. Ibid., 202.

23. Nancy Youssef, “Battle of Words” (lecture. U.S. Naval War College, Newport, RI, 10 MAR 2010).

24. Marc A. Genest, “Strategic Communications” (lecture. U.S. Naval War College, Newport, RI, 26 JAN 2009).

25. Antonio Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov, and Laptop: The Neo-Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan 2002-2007* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2008), 51.

26. Ibid., 98.

with the insurgents.²⁷ Insurgents often seek this type of overreaction to generate popular support amongst the hearts and minds of the people.²⁸

General McChrystal, the ISAF Commander, published new guidance as of 6 July 2009. His guidance, the Tactical Directive Memorandum, places emphasis on protecting civilians vice killing insurgents. The guidance also charged commanders to be more judicious when calling in air strikes.²⁹ Limitations placed on air-to-ground munitions and indirect fires against residential compounds seemed to eliminate the use of air strikes altogether. However, an exception was made for self-defense. A unit may employ air strikes when there are no other options available to effectively counter the threat, allowing commanders to protect their troops' lives as a matter of self-defense.³⁰ Additionally, ISAF forces may not enter or fire into a mosque or any religious or historical site except in self-defense.³¹

General McChrystal's immediate priority upon becoming the Commander of ISAF was to curtail the negative effects of air strikes by emphasizing protecting the Afghan population rather than killing the Taliban.³² During the pre-dawn hours of 4 September 2009, ISAF forces bombed two stolen fuel trucks near the town of Kunduz.³³ The trucks had become stuck in a riverbed and numerous civilians swarmed to siphon fuel. A coalition air strike

27. Ibid., 51.

28. U.S. Army. *Counterinsurgency*. Field Manual (FM) 3-24, Marine Corps Warfighting Publication (MCWP) 3-33.5. (Washington, DC: Headquarters Department of the Army and Navy, 15 December 2006), 3-15.

29. GEN Stanley McChrystal, commander, International Security Assistance Force, to International Security Assistance Forces, Tactical Directive Memorandum, 6 July 2009.

30. Ibid.

31. Ibid.

32. Crispian Balmer, "Karzai says United States Wants to Manipulate Him," *Reuters*, September 7, 2009, <http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSL7677562> (accessed 20 March 2010).

33. BBC News, "US General Sees Strike Aftermath," *British Broadcasting Corporation*, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/8239790.stm (accessed 20 March 2010).

struck the trucks resulting in 142 casualties.³⁴ It is unknown how many casualties were civilian and how many were Taliban fighters. The number of potential civilian casualties was so high that outrage was expressed from the local villagers and President Hamid Karzai who remarked, “What an error of judgment! More than 90 dead all because of a simple lorry that was, moreover, immobilised in a riverbed. Why didn't they send in ground troops to recover the fuel tank? By the by, General McChrystal telephoned me to apologise and to say that he himself hadn't given the order to attack.”³⁵

FM 3-24 states that an insurgency's center of gravity is the ability to gain support or at least tolerance of the people.³⁶ Another point of view, by Dr. Milan Vego, says that the legitimacy of the government is the strategic center of gravity.³⁷ Regardless of the argument, the support of the population is a critical requirement for both sides. The Kunduz bombing likely reinforced support or tolerance for the Taliban and hurt the perception of ISAF in Afghanistan. With this support an insurgent can obtain safe havens, new recruits, logistic support, and enable freedom of movement among other things.³⁸ For the insurgent, when a high collateral damage incident occurs, such as the bombing in Kunduz, ISAF's kinetic

34. South Asian News Agency, “Kunduz Bombing in Afghanistan: German Defense Ministry Sought to Obscure the Truth,” SANA, <http://www.sananews.net/english/2010/03/20/kunduz-bombing-in-afghanistan-german-defense-ministry-sought-to-obscure-the-truth/> (accessed 20 March 2010).

35. Crispian Balmer, “Karzai says United States Wants to Manipulate Him,” *Reuters*, September 7, 2009, <http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSL7677562> (accessed 20 March 2010).

36. U.S. Army. *Counterinsurgency*. Field Manual (FM) 3-24, Marine Corps Warfighting Publication (MCWP) 3-33.5. (Washington, DC: Headquarters Department of the Army and Navy, 15 December 2006), 3-13.

37. Milan N. Vego, *Joint Operational Warfare: Theory and Practice* (Newport, RI: U.S. Naval War College, 2009), VII-20.

38. U.S. Army. *Counterinsurgency*. Field Manual (FM) 3-24, Marine Corps Warfighting Publication (MCWP) 3-33.5. (Washington, DC: Headquarters Department of the Army and Navy, 15 December 2006), 3-13.

actions favor his agenda and he simply needs to reap the benefit of the newly created ill will against ISAF.

Presently, Operation Enduring Freedom has not concluded and enduring lessons learned should not be drawn during a conflict or war.³⁹ In order to predict if the current policy will succeed one could compare it to an insurgency where air strikes played a major part, such as the Vietnam War. By comparing the Vietnam counterinsurgency effort, where the use of air strikes negatively affected the outcome, it is logical to say the 2009 limitations of air power are justified at the operational level. Only by examining a counterinsurgency where air power was a strong factor in the fighting can one infer whether or not the new OEF restraints will help win the hearts and minds of the people and shorten the war.

VIETNAM BACKGROUND

In the Vietnam War, air power had a large role. Air strikes were used in support of ground troops and in bombing campaigns such as Rolling Thunder. Rolling Thunder, which started around 2 March 1965⁴⁰ and ended around 1 November 1968,⁴¹ “has become a classic example of the failure to devise a strategy appropriate for the war at hand.”⁴² Rolling Thunder was a campaign designed to show the United States’ resolve in assisting South

39. Milan N. Vego, *Joint Operational Warfare: Theory and Practice* (Newport, RI: U.S. Naval War College, 2009), XI-44.

40. William W. Momoyer, *Airpower in Three Wars (WWII, Korea, Vietnam)* (Maxwell Air Force Base, AL: Air University Press, 2003), 20.

41. Earl H. Tilford Jr., *Crosswinds: The Air Force’s Setup in Vietnam* (College Station, TX: Texas A & M University Press, 1993), 102.

42. Ibid., 101.

Vietnam and discourage North Vietnam from continuing the war.⁴³ The campaign was gradually executed because of the constant threat of Chinese confrontation.⁴⁴

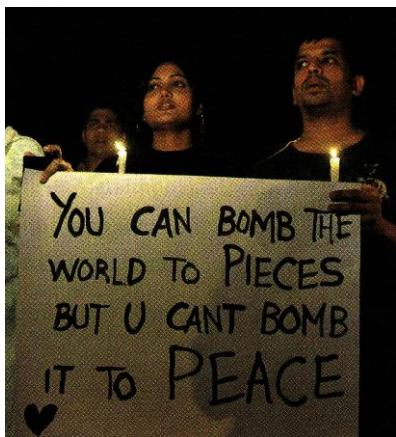


Figure 1. Pune mourns and hopes (reprinted from "On a Short Fuse," *The Economist*, Volume 394, Number 8670, [February 20-26, 2010] p. 39).

In the Vietnam War, aerial bombing and, at times,

artillery bombardment became a locus for hatred against the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) and Americans.⁴⁵

When a village suffered air strikes the reaction spread through the village society to the detriment of ARVN and United States forces. The Viet Cong said, "When one

innocent peasant is killed, ten rise in his place; when ten are killed, one hundred will rise up. First the relatives, friends, and neighbors of the victims are outraged; then the anger

spreads to the neighboring villages."⁴⁶ Recruitment into Viet Cong units normally rose as an effect of the misuse of aerial bombs or artillery.⁴⁷

Cultural factors, financial factors, and the ready presence of Viet Cong exacerbated the negative effect of bombardments. Culturally the peasants were attached to the land, gardens, and animals. It was very difficult to convince a peasant that he stood to have a better life financially and could live more securely by leaving his own village.⁴⁸ Financially, most

43. Mark Clodfelter, *The Limits of Air Power: The American Bombing of North Vietnam* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), 81.

44. William W. Momoyer, *Airpower in Three Wars (WWII, Korea, Vietnam)* (Maxwell Air Force Base, AL: Air University Press, 2003), 23.

45. John C. Donnell, Guy J. Pauker, and Joseph J. Zasloff. *Viet Cong Motivation and Morale in 1964: A Preliminary Report* (Santa Monica, CA: The Rand Corporation, 1965), 33.

46. Ibid., 33.

47. Ibid., 33.

48. Ibid., 34.

peasants lacked the resources to travel to safer areas.⁴⁹ “Pay-off’s” to local officials to obtain new documents allowing them to live in a new area were steep given the low income of an agrarian peasant.⁵⁰ Unfortunately the possibility of remaining in a Chieu Hoi camp for weeks or years while the government decided what to do was very real.⁵¹ Most effectively of all, the Viet Cong were quick to arrive and exploit damage and casualties to further their insurgent agenda through propaganda and recruiting.⁵²

Admiral Ulysses S. Grant Sharp Jr., Commander-in-Chief, Pacific Command (CINCPAC), felt that executing Rolling Thunder would demonstrate the United States’ resolve, reduce support to the Viet Cong, and foster a feeling of helplessness among the North Vietnamese military.⁵³ United States civilian and military leaders frequently stated that the communists were engaging in guerilla warfare and felt that destruction of resources necessary for conventional conflict would weaken the North Vietnamese capability and especially, their will to fight unconventionally.⁵⁴

Operation Rolling Thunder produced scant results. In 1969, scientists commissioned by McNamara conducted an assessment of Rolling Thunder. The assessment concluded that rather than weakening North Vietnam, the bombing campaign improved Hanoi’s war fighting capacity.⁵⁵ In response to the bombing, North Vietnam created redundant supply networks to South Vietnam and eliminated choke points making it harder for follow on attacks to achieve

49. Ibid., 34.

50. Ibid., 34.

51. Ibid., 34.

52. Ibid., 34.

53. Mark Clodfelter, *The Limits of Air Power: The American Bombing of North Vietnam* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), 81.

54. Ibid., 117-118.

55. Benjamin S. Lambeth, *The Transformation of American Air Power* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), 20.

results. The lead sentence of the report stated that the bombing had shown, “no measurable effect on Hanoi’s ability to mount and support military operations in the south.”⁵⁶ By 1969, the transportation system that fed the Ho Chi Minh Trail was fully repaired and traffic was flowing through it heavily.⁵⁷ The report further stated that North Vietnam was a subsistence agricultural economy that presented an “unrewarding target” for United States air power, at least so long as the war remained predominantly an insurgency in the south rather than a “clash of regular forces on both sides.”⁵⁸

From the perspective of the Viet Cong in South Vietnam, one prisoner explained his realities of the conflict. The prisoner felt the South Vietnamese people were living a miserable life. Bombs destroyed their homes. Their rice fields and gardens were left uncultivated. The people did not have enough food to feed themselves and had to live in huts. He believed the Vietnamese people were being killed by bombs and shells and had to earn money for each meal, which convinced the prisoner to continue his fight, “The more we saw the realities, the more logical would be our struggle, and the more encouraged we were.”⁵⁹

VIETNAM DISCUSSION / ANALYSIS

The intent of bombing of North Vietnam was not to achieve strategic objectives so much as to improperly send “signals” in an effort to convince Hanoi’s leaders that continued fighting was futile.⁶⁰ Through Rolling Thunder, National Security Action Memorandum

56. Ibid., 20.

57. Ibid., 51.

58. Ibid., 51.

59. Konrad Kellen, *Conversations With Enemy Soldiers in Late 1968/Early 1969: A Study of Motivation and Morale* (Santa Monica, CA: The Rand Corporation, 1970), 50-51.

60. Benjamin S. Lambeth, *The Transformation of American Air Power* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), 31.

(NSAM) 273, and NSAM 288 the American policy was to convince North Vietnam they could not win and therefore stop sending supplies and personnel into South Vietnam.⁶¹ President Johnson offered to negotiate in April 1965 if Hanoi stopped supporting the Viet Cong.⁶² His offer was dismissed.⁶³ President Johnson remarked, “I saw our bombs as my political resources for negotiating a peace. On the one hand, our planes and our bombs could be used as carrots for the South...pushing them to clean up their corrupt house...on the other hand...as sticks against the North.”⁶⁴

The use of air strikes in North and South Vietnam hindered United States’ goals in her counterinsurgent fight. Rolling Thunder had goals that did not align with the strategy in Vietnam. The bombing steeled the resolve of the North Vietnamese. Their largely agricultural society was less susceptible to a bombing campaign. The bombing did little to prevent the flow of supplies and personnel into South Vietnam. Peasants whose villages suffered bombing or artillery bombardment, disliked the United States forces and lent their support to the Viet Cong. This was a critical element necessary to the Viet Cong as guerillas and insurgents. They needed the popular support of the people, which is in one view, the insurgents’ center of gravity.⁶⁵

61. R. Mark A. Clodfelter, *Air Power and Limited War: An Analysis of the Air Campaigns Against North Vietnam as Instruments of National Policy* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina, 1987), 55.

62. Ibid., 93.

63. Ibid., 93.

64. Earl H. Tilford Jr., *Crosswinds: The Air Force’s Setup in Vietnam* (College Station, TX: Texas A & M University Press, 1993), 63.

65. U.S. Army. *Counterinsurgency*. Field Manual (FM) 3-24, Marine Corps Warfighting Publication (MCWP) 3-33.5. (Washington, DC: Headquarters Department of the Army and Navy, 15 December 2006), 3-13.

AFGHANISTAN DISCUSSION / ANALYSIS

The current policy in Afghanistan gives the protection of the Afghan population higher priority than killing the Taliban.⁶⁶ This is aligned with the principles for counterinsurgency. The purpose of COIN is to support the host nation government in gaining legitimacy and the support of the populace.⁶⁷ When ISAF focused on protecting the populace it embraced the fact that COIN is fought among the population and that the people's well-being was a priority. Doing so shows that ISAF forces are willing to provide security from intimidation and coercion and begin working on providing basic economic needs and essential services to the Afghan people.

Forces conducting COIN aim to mobilize the good will of the people against the insurgents.⁶⁸ The Afghan people must feel protected, not threatened, by ISAF's actions and operations. General McChrystal's guidance in his Tactical Directive in July 2009 states, that gaining and maintaining the support of the people should guide every action taken.⁶⁹ The memorandum explains that victory will not come based on the number of Taliban killed but on ISAF's ability to separate insurgents from their potential center of gravity—the people. It also warns of avoiding the trap of winning tactical victories at the cost of suffering strategic defeat by causing civilian casualties or excessive damage and thus alienating the people.

66. GEN Stanley McChrystal, commander, International Security Assistance Force, to International Security Assistance Forces, Tactical Directive Memorandum, 6 July 2009.

67. U.S. Army. *Counterinsurgency*. Field Manual (FM) 3-24, Marine Corps Warfighting Publication (MCWP) 3-33.5. (Washington, DC: Headquarters Department of the Army and Navy, 15 December 2006), B-10.

68. Ibid., 7-5.

69. GEN Stanley McChrystal, commander, International Security Assistance Force, to International Security Assistance Forces, Tactical Directive Memorandum, 6 July 2009.

More specifically the guidance states that leaders at all levels scrutinize and limit the use of force, such as CAS, when it is likely to produce civilian casualties.⁷⁰

This policy improves on the policies of air strikes in Vietnam. In Vietnam, priorities were placed on body count and kinetic operations.⁷¹ Operation Rolling Thunder was measured in tonnage of bombs dropped and sorties flown. It is logical to assume that had the priority in Vietnam been on winning the hearts and minds of the people, the United States could have denied the Viet Cong access to their possible center of gravity, the people. This likely would have disrupted safe havens, recruiting, logistic support and other necessary services for an insurgency to succeed.

COUNTERARGUMENT

Some would argue that the restraints on air strikes are too stringent for tactical commanders. Air strikes are a valuable tool and have seen increasing use as OEF has continued.⁷² Limiting the use of air strikes increases the risk to troops when engaged with the enemy.

The Marine offensive in Marjah, Afghanistan, which began in February 2010, was a hard fought battle for the forces in Helmand Province⁷³. Marjah is significant because it is the source of opium upon which the Taliban depends for money to fuel the insurgency.⁷⁴ Some Marines felt they were fighting the battle with a handicap, which was the strict ROE in place.

70. Ibid.

71. Joshua Rovner, “The Will to Persist: Intelligence and Covert Action in the Vietnam War,” (lecture, Naval War College, Newport, RI, 18 December 2009).

72. Michael Hoffman, “Experts: McChrystal Order Important But May Be Unrealistic,” *Army Times*, volume 70, Issue 10 (September 21, 2009): 27.

73. Alfred de Montesquiou and Deb Riechmann, “Troops: Strict War Rules Slow Marjah Offensive,” *Army Times*, http://www.armytimes.com/news/2010/02/ap_afghanistan_marjah_war_rules_021510/ (accessed 20 March 2010).

74. Michelle Norris, “Targeting Afghanistan’s Opium Market” *National Public Radio*, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=121167885> (accessed 18 April 2010).

Some members of the Marines who had been pinned down by enemy fire felt they could not count on quick air support because it took too long to positively identify the shooters.⁷⁵

The situation in Marjah is a change from the situation in Fallujah, Iraq. When Marines encountered enemy snipers in Fallujah, they routinely called in air strikes.⁷⁶ In Marjah troops say that if a man emerges from a Taliban hideout after shooting begins they cannot fire at him unless he is seen carrying a weapon. This makes it possible for an insurgent to engage ISAF forces then set his weapon down and walk freely out of a compound, potentially toward a cached weapon in another location. It is unclear how many times this has happened but Marines on the ground have repeatedly seen men drop their weapons and walk away, blending in with civilians.⁷⁷ For Marine units, not having the ability to engage the enemy with air strikes is counter to their combined arms doctrine. Limiting that tool greatly increases risk the commander must accept for his forces to accomplish their mission.

The restraints placed on the Marines in Marjah, Afghanistan are consistent with winning the trust of the people. The goal of the Marines in Marjah was not to kill insurgents but to protect the people.⁷⁸ A counterinsurgency requires commanders to take risk, especially at the tactical level. This tenet is true particularly during COIN operations, where insurgents can hide among the local populace.⁷⁹

75. Alfred de Montesquiou and Deb Riechmann, "Troops: Strict War Rules Slow Marjah Offensive," *Army Times*, http://www.armytimes.com/news/2010/02/ap_afghanistan_marjah_war_rules_021510/ (accessed 20 March 2010).

76. Ibid.

77. Ibid.

78. Ibid.

79. U.S. Army. *Counterinsurgency*. Field Manual (FM) 3-24, Marine Corps Warfighting Publication (MCWP) 3-33.5. (Washington, DC: Headquarters Department of the Army and Navy, 15 December 2006), 7-13.

Commanders can protect their troops as a matter of self-defense in General McChrystal's Tactical Directive Memo. Guidance from the ISAF commander allows for self-defense when no other options are available to counter the threat. However, the offensive ability, with respect to air strikes, has been curtailed. Therefore, the tactical restrictions placed on the troops in Marjah are connected with the operational goals associated with a COIN conflict.

CONCLUSION

At a first glance, limiting the use of air strikes in Afghanistan seems to place troops at greater risk for little benefit. Despite this appearance it is the correct way to fight an insurgency. Operational commanders face different risks than tactical commanders such as mission failure or the collapse of the host nation government. Operational level commanders have to balance the removal of a kinetic tool from their forces, against winning the support of the Afghan people. For a counterinsurgency, General McChrystal decided correctly. Conducting operations where ground forces freely use the air instrument may jeopardize the success of ISAF. The likely resulting collateral damage will counteract any good that may have come from these operations. The more the Afghan people support ISAF the closer the Taliban are to losing their support and thus their foothold in Afghanistan. Following that logic, the less support the Taliban have, the sooner the conditions are set that enable ISAF to transition responsibility to Afghan forces. Although the limitation of the air instrument seems detrimental to tactical formation it is a vital step in winning the hearts and minds of the Afghan people.

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